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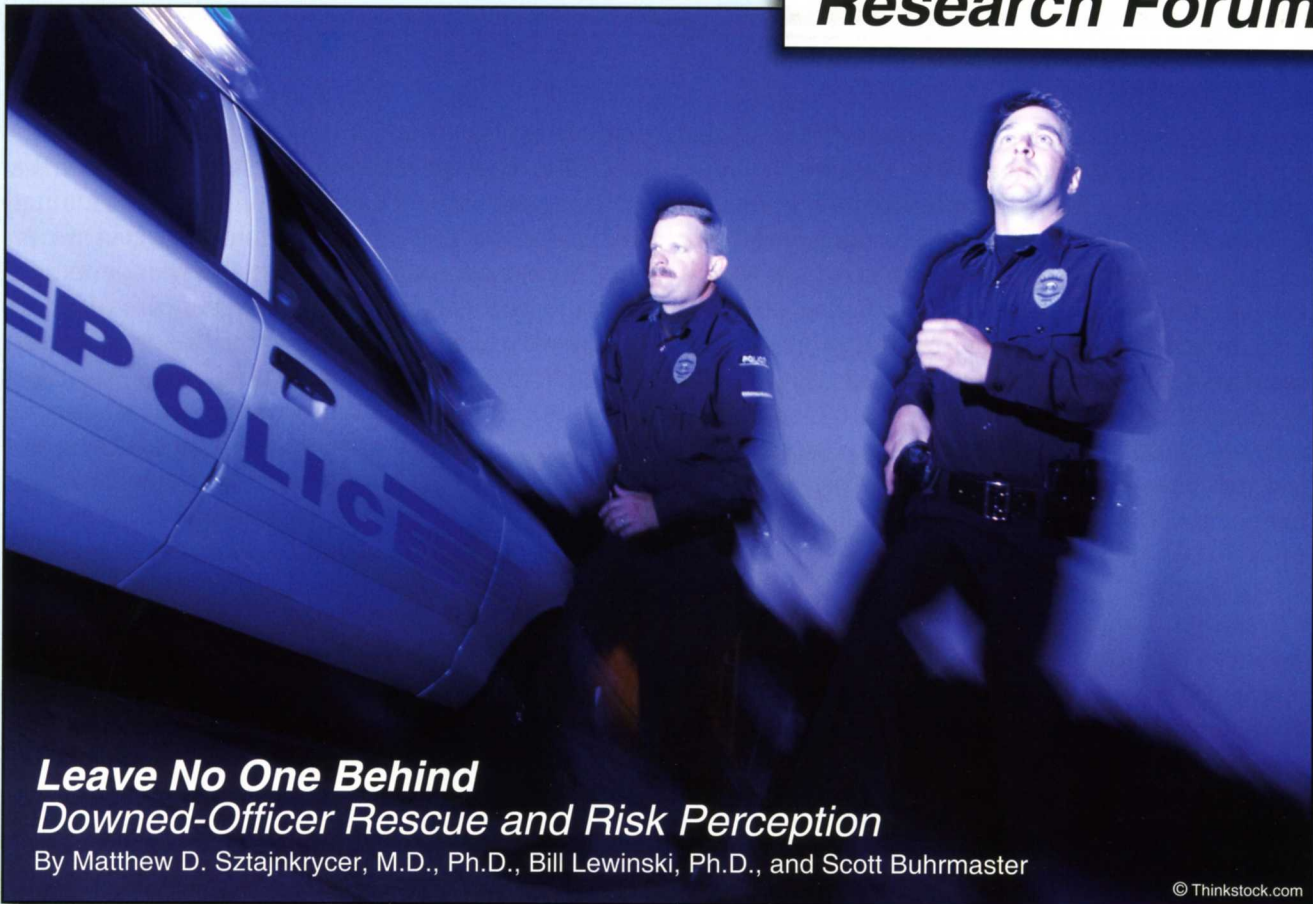


**FBI**  
**Law Enforcement**  
**Bulletin**

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A close-up photograph of a hand with fingers spread, reaching out towards the viewer. The background is a soft, out-of-focus image of a person's face, possibly a woman, with a warm, golden light illuminating the scene.

**Reporting  
Sexual Violence**



### **Leave No One Behind** *Downed-Officer Rescue and Risk Perception*

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**H**uman decision making is classically described as a conscious, analytical process. In this context, the rescue of a downed officer reflects the fundamental conflict between the need to do what is perceived as right for the injured officer versus the risk such action creates. The reality is that such calculated reasoning frequently does not occur.

In a previous scenario-based observational study, despite specific education in downed-officer risk assessment, all participating officers proceeded into the kill zone to rescue a downed officer.<sup>1</sup> This occurred even when the injured officer had wounds incompatible with life. When subsequently questioned about their decisions, most of the officers could not provide an explanation for their actions. Based upon these observations, it appeared that under circumstances of simulated

risk and perceived stress, these officers formed their decision-making strategies via a different process than an idealized conscious analysis.

To understand law enforcement officers' perceptions of risk and uncertainty in the context of downed-officer rescue, the authors surveyed 1,703 members of the law enforcement profession over a 1-month period (January 17-February 16, 2009). They present their findings to help improve officer education and training in the hope of minimizing the risk associated with these incidents, thereby saving the lives of those who willingly place themselves in harm's way.

#### **STUDY OVERVIEW**

Half of the respondents reported having participated in formal training on downed-officer rescue in the previous 5 years. Ninety-nine advised being

personally involved in a downed-officer rescue during the same time frame. The majority of those involved in a downed-officer rescue (44.4 percent) described their primary assignment as patrol. Only 9 identified their assignment as a full-time SWAT team member.

Limited by all of the factors present in survey-based research, including recall and selection bias, the study likely reflected partiality inherent in the selection process of law enforcement officers. After all, these individuals perform their duties despite an awareness of risk and danger, a quality sought in the hiring of sworn personnel. Selection for the character trait of a selfless willingness to place their lives on the line to help and protect others may explain the findings of the study. Not everyone is willing to accept these risks, and not everyone can be a police officer. However, the results of this study were geared toward implications for law enforcement, not the general public.

In addition, the study tended toward the views of more senior officers, who may be removed from daily operations and street-level risk assessment. As noted by several survey respondents, many of the questions were deliberately vague and open to interpretation. While this was necessary to minimize potential bias of question phrasing on responses, it potentially detracted from the results.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Risk Acceptance

The study participants consistently viewed law enforcement as a high-risk profession. On a

scale of 1 (least threatening) to 10 (most treacherous), the average respondent rated the risk of law enforcement as 7.9. This perception remained unchanged by an officer's number of years on the force or type of assignment. Respondents recognized and accepted that they could be injured or killed while performing their duties. The fact that officers—fully aware of the hazards—continue

to perform their duties speaks volumes about the character of the members of the profession.

Any tactical decisions that involve an assessment of risk, such as a downed-officer rescue, must be made in the context of this baseline acceptance of danger. More than 96 percent of the respondents felt that it was acceptable or very acceptable to jeopardize their lives to help save another officer. Of course, by choosing the law enforcement profession,

they already had committed themselves to operating under a baseline level of significantly elevated perceived peril. This willingness to place themselves in harm's way for their colleagues reflects a fundamental warrior ethos: leave no one behind.

### Risk Preference

Traditionally, the major theory of decision making under risk has been the expected utility model.<sup>2</sup> Herein, gains and losses are viewed as absolutes, and rational decision making favors the choice that offers the highest profit. More recently, a modified version, prospect theory, has acquired enhanced acceptance.<sup>3</sup> In this model, outcomes are expressed in terms of relative increases and decreases from a neutral starting point. Deliberate, rational decision making still will favor the comparative greatest

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return or smallest expense. However, some specific differences exist in the rational approaches to risk and uncertainty. The response to losses is more extreme than to similar gains; in other words, people dislike failure more than they like success. Decision making is context, or frame, dependent. In the setting of potential rewards, individuals tend to be risk averse, preferring a sure gain to a gamble. By contrast, in the setting of potential losses, they lean toward risk-taking behavior, preferring to chance a potential win over a certain defeat.

To assess risk preferences of the respondents to a downed-officer rescue, the survey included a scenario-based question framed as either a gain or a loss (see table 1). Depending on the version of the survey they received, respondents answered either question one, expressed as a gain (saving of officers), or question two, presented as a loss (death of officers). In each question, the overall number of surviving officers remained the same; the decision differed solely in terms of certainty versus gamble and, therefore, reflected risk preference. To keep

Table 1

### Risk Preference Questions and Responses

**Scenario:** An explosive device detonates, injuring three officers as they respond to a reported man-with-gun call. They are lying on the ground, screaming, with shrapnel wounds to the lower extremities. There is quite a bit of blood. If they do not receive medical aid, all three officers will bleed to death. Which of the following do you feel is the best option?

**Question One:** 873 respondents replied to the version framed as a gain (saving of officers).

- A rescue attempt in which one officer will be saved: 269, or 30.8 percent, chose this response.
- A rescue attempt in which a one-third chance exists that all three officers will be saved and a two-thirds chance that no officer will be saved: 604, or 69.2 percent, selected this answer.

**Question Two:** 829 respondents responded to the version presented as a loss (death of officers).

- A rescue attempt in which two officers will die: 88, or 10.6 percent, agreed with this approach.
- A rescue attempt in which a one-third chance exists that nobody will die and two-thirds chance that all three officers will die: 741, or 89.4 percent, picked this course of action.

